

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Subcommittee

Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities

Alexandra — 12 April 2006

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The CHAIR — Leanne, thank you very much for changing positions for us. That was very kind of you. If you could please tell us your full name and address and the organisation you are representing today.

Cr PLEASH — My name is Leanne Beth Pleash. I live at [ADDRESS REMOVED] Highlands. I am here representing the Murrindindi Shire Council in my capacity as chair of the community and customer services committee. Thank you very much for the opportunity to address the committee, and I also thank you for the opportunity to sit in on today's proceedings. We work in a number of roles in partnership with a number of the organisations that presented today, so it was good to hear and affirm their different focuses and then see where council needs to pick up in between, and I thank you for that.

I appreciate you will not have had an opportunity to read my submission. The way that it is structured comes, again, from a personal perspective. I grew up in a country town in New South Wales. I have tried to contrast a lot of the issues that I dealt with as a 17-year-old wanting desperately to escape a town that I could not drive away from because I was not old enough. The same issues have transcended both distance and time. A lot of what we are discussing here, we are still asking the same questions that we had to grapple with back then. I will let you read through that.

Just finishing on that point, some of the issues that we face are communal. They will be the same as what you have heard across other rural municipalities. Issues around training, higher education and travel are the main focuses of a lot of people wanting to leave when they have finished their education. I will quickly flip to a statement — I spoke to a number of young people who have returned to the area and asked them the reasons they left, and the list is fairly long. Their focus was search for freedom, anonymity, travel, study, adventure, companionship, work, entertainment and access to life choices that are not supported locally. While we talk of the main areas, I think there probably are quite a lot of subtle reasons why people leave. I just make that point.

Murrindindi has some very specific aspects that we have to deal with. Primarily it is distance. We are a very large shire, and because of amalgamation we are still learning to live as one shire. We do not have a lot of interconnection between the two clusters that separate east and west. It is certainly getting much better, but we still have not quite got there yet as a single entity. We struggle with some of that, we struggle with distance and we struggle with the lack of public transport, which I will not labour because others have raised that today. Again, as Bill and others have raised, we have limited job markets, and that is certainly a focus of the current council. We are really going to be pushing to try to foster the development of economic growth in the area. We see it as if we get the job structures that will encourage people to come back, it will actually address a number of the underlying issues.

I draw your attention to the fact that recently we tried to get funding for a community bus to start tackling the public transport issues, but our shire was not eligible. Because we were not deemed to be sufficiently in hardship, nor a growth or decline area, we were not eligible, so again there are some policy decisions that are contributing to our issues. We do not have a Centrelink, and neither do we have a Job Network provider in our shire, so to get unemployed people access to the infrastructure they need to start to gain employment, they already have to leave our shire to get access to those things, or try to do it all online. We struggle with not having a single large urban centre. We do not have a Ballarat; we do not have a Bendigo. We have got a large number of small, distributed communities with no real way of connecting them, so we struggle.

Leading up to that, we see that there are three groups that make up the young people in our area. There are those who want to leave. You heard from Kate Leadbeater earlier today. That is a very typical scenario. I certainly did it; you finish high school and you are out of there. You have got to get to the big cities and stay there, and ultimately you get to a point in your life where you do tend to come back to rural Australia. For a whole range of reasons, which we will touch on in a minute, it does not necessarily mean that you go back to your rural community. Sometimes there can be history there, and sometimes there is still family there, but you do not necessarily want to go back there on a day-to-day basis. However, we do reconnect to that lifestyle. Something that at 18 can be very claustrophobic can actually be quite appealing at 28 when you are thinking about your own family and you want to re-engage with that life.

In our recent discussions with our communities in preparation for our council plan, a lot of the young people highlighted that community life and community lifestyle is a real advantage. At the same time they see it as a disadvantage, because it is claustrophobic. Everyone knows way too much about your business, and some people need that little bit of space. We take the position that with those who want to leave, do not stop them. We certainly

want to get them back, but we see that there is a real opportunity for those people to be ambassadors for our shire. We see that we have responsibility to ensure that they have got the skills and the confidence to be able to go out there and embrace the world and deal with those transitions of going to larger centres.

I refer to some of the programs we are supporting. Earlier the community kitchens program was mentioned. We want to try to encourage young people to come along and learn how to prepare healthy meals and to budget and all of those other life skills that they are going to need. With those who want to go we say, 'Fine. We will support you in that', and we recognise that they are right and that they do get a lot of benefits. They get exposed to new ideas. At the moment I think we are failing those who do not particularly want to go away, but who go away specifically for work or for study. For those people we can try to learn to change our infrastructure and the way we deliver our training to ensure that we can cater for them locally.

The others are those we want to get back. You have heard the message all the way through that young people come back because they have a connection. They have connections to one of three things. It can be a person — a family or a partner. It can be the place; so there is something very specific. They may have tried living elsewhere, but the place they come from is home. Home imprints very deeply and subtly on us. The third connection they have is to the lifestyle, and that tends to be when they are ready to settle down or want to embrace a more communal way of living. That is something you can tire of in the cities. If you have experienced communal living in the country as a child, the anonymity of living in the city can be wonderful at first; however, it can become quite isolating after a long period of time. When you get older you may have lost someone special to you and want to reconnect to a life that has more meaning and more connection at a personal level. We see it as our responsibility to get those people back and to help them to have entrance points to do so. They cannot come back if there are no jobs for them.

There is another issue. As has been said, the people who leave at year 10 and go into traineeships tend to stay or tend to come back because they have skills that directly translate. In getting university graduates back, when they have an expectation of a salary and a professional range of experiences, we simply do not have the range of professional jobs to entice them back. There is the growing effect of the tree changers. They are actually competing for professional jobs with semi-retired people. Such people have a bit more independent cash and might do a couple of days consulting or whatever in the city, but they are looking for something else to pick up locally for their own time. We are having the same people with similar qualifications competing for a similar job set, of which we do not have very many. We are starting to experience that.

In the same way we are experiencing that because new people are coming into the community it is driving up house prices, so it is harder for returning graduates to try to buy in whether at a property or just a housing level in our towns. We are feeling pressures in different communities. We will survive — we will learn how to cope with that — but we are feeling those tensions and the rubs at the moment.

As a shire council we have identified four strategies or four premises that we are basing our intention on — this is on page 5 for anyone who wants to follow and is halfway down that page. The first one is that that if they grow up in a favourable rural experience, we think that will foster a connection with the place. It will not be the boring town they grew up in where there was nothing to do. It will actually be a really positive thing they will remember and hopefully will imprint on them.

The second one is the happy family or social life where they feel accepted. Picking up on that acceptance issue, I think that is an incredibly isolating thing. When you are a teenager and you do not fit in with family and siblings and people are saying, 'Why aren't you like your brother?' — and all the stuff that happens when you go to the same school and have the same teachers — it can be incredibly isolating. Mentoring programs should really be supported even at an individual level.

Anecdotally, my husband teaches one of our local kids how to play drums. It is an unpaid thing — he just rocks up once a week. In the course of learning how to play drums, they talk about a whole lot of life issues. He is a young guy who does not live with his dad. Forming those partnerships and relationships, I think, is an opportunity that we probably have in a rural setting, but they still do not have that in the city. You get a bit suspicious when you have access to those sorts of people in a city setting — certainly Ben knows Highlands well — we still have the freedom. If you are at the school for some reason and a parent is running late, anyone will pick up that child, take them home and they will feel safe. We have a level of trust in our community which is a really welcome thing. It is something to be valued and it is something that really can not be articulated when you selling a rural lifestyle. I think

mentoring, and letting kids know they are accepted, that it is okay to be different and all those messages are really positive things that we can do. We have already picked up mentoring.

The last one is the provision of adequate job opportunities and recreational spaces, which is a theme that is coming out a lot. Kids are saying, 'We do not have anywhere to go'. They do not have anywhere to hang, if it is not the takeaway shop. Because of those issues that you heard from Kate earlier, the fact they are getting bussed in — it is a 30 minute car ride, but it is an hour on the bus — there is no way to get access back to their mums if they stay at each other's places on weekends. So they tend to stay on their own. One of the local young people who has returned made the point that when they used to go to interschool sport meets, it was really obvious that our kids do not follow the trends. They are not into music and there are no budding musicians who talk about getting a band together. Because their mates live elsewhere and they do not have access to them, they tend to do their own thing. They just hang out in their room, or they read, or they do what ever. But we really have to learn to provide safe recreational spaces. The library here in Alex is starting to really embrace that now. For those of you may know it, it is a really colourful and vibrant place — there are comfy couches and kids are encouraged to go there both with school and outside of school. We, as a shire, have to look at those strategies of making those spaces available for a longer period of time — and that is a resourcing issue for us. But we need safe places where they can go.

There are so many points the others raised that I would love to touch on. I guess in terms of job opportunities, we are seeing the fact that we have growth in the hospitality seasonal market, but it is not sustaining and it makes us very vulnerable. While tourism is an important industry and we want to support it, we cannot base our entire economic basis on these young people relying on that. We have already seen after the fires just the drop off we had around the Yea area. We need a solid economic basis here in a shire for those.

I think that is probably enough. I know you have had to listen to a lot today. Looking at the strategies, as I have said, there are 40-plus individual strategies that we are looking at as a shire. The couple that I would really like to highlight, and things that I guess we really cannot do on our own, actually leads to a point. In terms of a lot of the strategies that we are talking about here, we have good solid partnerships. We are working in a LLEN that has representation from businesses to schools to the shire. We are certainly learning how to work in partnership. There are good programs on the ground and we, as a shire, see our role is to support that and facilitate, rather than try to duplicate or provide those services directly.

One of the programs we are about to implement, and you may have come across it, is the Lighthouse program, which is a program for local governments. It is being driven through the MAV, and I think 41 of the 78 — or whatever — local councils have signed on. But it is a program that really supports community planning, where we help the community to come up with their own solutions, and we really foster that community plan, that they own it and we are purely here to help them facilitate how they want to implement it.

One of the focuses that we have driven for is that the needs of youth should be really captured in those community plans, and the communities are coming together. They are finding their solutions; they have always had to. Part of the ethic of living in a rural community is that you get in and do what you need to. We do not want to subvert that role. We really want the communities to provide what they need for their people because we have the diversity, we have the issues on the eastern side, where we have communities around Marysville and Buxton, where their access down to the city is through the Black Spur, which tends to see a lot of those high figures of people relocating, whereas probably on the west it is easier to do that commute.

Some of the issues around helping those communities to be more empowered and vibrant in their own right are the issues of public liability and privacy — the fact that we cannot have a skills register we can tap into because of privacy issues; the fact that communities cannot fund their own activities because of public liability issues. They are things that we need to tackle at a community and a state and national level because we cannot make up our own — or maybe we can; maybe I have not explored that yet. I would really ask for your assistance in how we can come up with overcoming some those barriers.

The other thing — and it is always the thing that local government asks for — is if there is going to be a recommendation out of this for resourcing, I would really encourage that it be resourced at the local level. If we are saying that people come back because they have a point of connection, that level of connection has to be local and it has to be grassroots, to make a connection at an individual level. I do not believe we can do it at a state level, so I do ask that resourcing and any recommendation for resourcing come down at a local level, whether it is to the

councils or to the agencies who are actually delivering the program, and particularly in ongoing provisions of community development officers to really help us with that. That would be huge.

Another thing that is a great initiative — and I know this is not party political so I do not want to bring it into that — is the community strengthening grants. Knowing that there are mechanisms that we can tap into, matching dollars or whatever, to help us get communities to deliver on their own ideas is a great option. So I thank you for that.

I will just quickly say that I actually did a double degree out of Monash in the city, and I run an information technology company. I sit at the top of Highlands, and we are lucky enough to be close enough to the exchange that we get ISDN, but we do not get ADSL, so we do not have broadband access; and certainly since we got ISDN it is much better — we do not drop out after 10 minutes trying to do dial-ups. So that is good. While we do need to look at broadband — and very much if we are to go down the path of videoconferencing and the higher technologies — I actually suspect that we are missing a business opportunity in the area. We just do not have enough computer technicians that people can tap into, who they can just ring to come and get the optimum out of what they are doing.

I am lucky; I have a husband and a business partner who knows all that technical knowledge, so we run quite quickly, even though we are on quite old technology at the exchange level. I fear that we are saying we need broadband, when we are missing the fact that if we had more people who could come to someone's home and optimise their system to run as efficiently as it can within the limitations that they have, I actually think we could probably achieve a lot more as far as online goes.

I do a lot of my study and research online through the universities, through their libraries and their online systems, and it is just brilliant; it really is so good. I think that possibly we need to work closer in partnerships with those universities, to talk about how we can deliver that, and the idea that Vicki Danby raised earlier about having a communal facility is a brilliant idea. I am sorry I did not think of it myself, but that is what the benefit of these days are — to learn from others. So I thank you. Are there questions?

Mr INGRAM — Leanne, you touched before on youth involvement in decision making. One of the things that has come through today is that young people, if they are connected to their community, are more likely to be involved. What sort of avenues of identifying youth leaders and receiving information and including it as part of the decision-making process does the council take and what are the benefits of that?

Cr PLEASH — The FReeZA program — the under-age, drug and alcohol-free events — is a really good one because it works with the communities and the young people in the community to get those events up and happening. Through that we can identify quite a lot of leaders. The schools, I must admit, are doing a brilliant job. They have youth leadership programs and are certainly working with Rotary for its international exchange programs as well. I think we tap into quite a lot. Again, with the benefit of size — or lack of size — you actually know who are the kids who are actually carrying those roles in the community. It is quite easy, in a sense, to tap into them. I think we probably do not do as much as we should at really enhancing that. Certainly I would like to foster more leadership programs, both for youth and for older people. I actually went through the Goulburn-Murray leadership program, and I would certainly be encouraging that we put our young people through the Alpine one. I think there are great benefits and exposure to a whole range of issues.

The other thing we are doing is that on the council's new web site we have actually got a youth perspective, so there is a youth-only focus in that. We will be providing them with lots of opportunities. One thing that I mentioned to Ben earlier — and if you get an opportunity when you are out in the Wimmera, there was a great program that they set up five years ago called Keeping Connected, which is still available if you go online. It is about encouraging young people that when they leave school — so you work in partnership with the high schools — they have the opportunity to sign-on for a Keeping Connected pack. That way you send them a copy of the local papers so that they can keep in touch with what is happening with the footy and that kind of thing. Through those programs I think we can start to really identify, and we will really be pushing quite strongly for that. Again, there is the community partnerships with the Lighthouse program, where you actually establish a steering committee at a community level, and it is not always the ones that you would think. So we would make sure that we actually try to encourage that they have young people in that, to start to get them to come through.

The other thing we are doing is working with the Yea Business and Tourism Association to get a young ambassadors program happening, to get young people to sign-on and encourage them to work in the visitor information centre — making sure, though, that they have information about the shire but also training their customer service skills and helping them be a lot more confident. Again, it is always pragmatic. There are always 10 approaches to take, because no one way will work — or at least not work for everybody. So, we try.

The CHAIR — Leanne, thank you very much for appearing today and your submission. You will get a copy of the transcript in about two weeks. You can correct typographical errors but not matters of substance.

Cr PLEASH — Loved it; thank you.

Committee adjourned.